

Whale Plan Update

National Marine Fisheries Service/Northeast

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Revisions to TRP Proceeding

NMFS Working on TRT Recommendations for Gear Modification and Dynamic Management

Revisions to the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Plan are proceeding on two tracks following the May 23-24 Take Reduction Team meeting in Gloucester.

On one track, NMFS whale team is drafting the gear modifications developed by the TRT in February and refined by the Northeast component of the TRT in May. NMFS is preparing a summary of those gear recommendations for review by the full TRT in July. NMFS is aiming for an autumn publication of a rule implementing gear modification revisions. Some elements of the revisions may require gear changes by November 1 and other elements (gear marking, for instance) would not take effect until a later date.

While work proceeds on gear modifications,

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NMFS is also working on a proposal for dynamic management (opening and/or closing some waters depending on the absence or presence of right whales). NMFS is currently studying dynamic management proposals presented at the May TRT meeting by officials from three New England states (Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Maine).

TRT members were asked to provide comment on the states' proposals by June 9.

Chris Mantzaris, assistant regional administrator for NMFS in the Northeast, plans to meet with fisheries officials in each of those states to discuss the states' dynamic management proposals (also referred to as Risk Reduction Contingency Plans).

NMFS is considering how state plans could be coordinated with federal plans required by the MMPA and the ESA.

NMFS expects to provide TRT members with a summary of a draft dynamic management proposal, based on recent TRT discussion, this summer. A proposed rule containing dynamic management measures should be ready in the fall, according to Doug Beach, the NMFS whale plan coordinator for the Northeast.

Upcoming Meetings

Members of the Southeast component of the TRT have asked

to sub-divide the group during gear modification discussions. Kathy Wang, NMFS whale plan coordinator for the Southeast, expects to meet this summer with a mid-Atlantic subgroup and a Southeast sub-group. The sub-group meetings may be held in conjunction with a Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council meeting.

The full TRT is not scheduled to meet again in 2000, although the team will be asked to review documents relating to gear modification and dynamic management. NMFS expects to convene sub-groups of the TRT in 2001.

Gear Advisory Group

NMFS is reconstituting the Gear Advisory Group (GAG) and plans to call that group together later this year to review and discuss the on-going effort to develop gear less likely to entangle whales. The GAG was established in 1997 to provide recommendations to the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team and to NMFS. GAG members include fishermen, whale experts, and gear engineers. The GAG last met in 1998. NMFS plans to convene the GAG at regular intervals (to be determined at the next meeting) to comment on gear projects under way and to suggest additional gear ideas for future study.

Salvador on Board

Glenn Salvador, the NMFS whale plan coordinator for Maine, has been hired as a permanent NMFS employee. A former commercial fisherman, Salvador has been working under a contract to implement the whale plan in Maine since 1997. Perhaps best known for working with fishermen to develop whale-safe gear, Salvador has also helped provide information to and training for hundreds of fishermen from Maine to North Carolina. Salvador's role and responsibilities

will not change as a result of his permanent employee status.

Great South Channel Re-opening Considered, Rejected

While the TRT, NMFS, and New England states are working to develop a strategy of dynamic management, the agency employed a dynamic management tool already available under the existing whale TRP. In late May the agency prepared to re-open the Great South Channel to fixed gear when it appeared right whales had left for the season. Whale sightings in surveys in the northern half of GSC in May had fallen from 21 to 1, 3, 1, 0, and 0. Two surveys in the southern half revealed no right whales.

Before re-opening the area, NMFS conducted two surveys in a three-day period, as recommended by the TRT in its May meeting. When the entire area was surveyed over the three-day period, it was revealed that right whales were still in the Great South Channel and the plan to re-open the area to fixed gear was put on hold.

The Great South Channel automatically re-opens to fixed gear July 1.